

The Scandal of Middle East Studies

Bankrupt scholarship and foolish policy advice, subsidized by the taxpayer. **BY STANLEY KURTZ**

AS CONGRESS prepares to convene hearings on the intelligence failures exposed by September 11, it is important to recognize that the failures go beyond the dearth of agents on the ground in the Middle East and the shortage of Arabic speakers at the CIA. Our neglect of the terrorist threat is of long standing and reflects, among other things, the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of American academic programs in Middle Eastern studies.

Considering the wide publicity given to Osama bin Laden's activities, American scholars should have been onto him years ago. They should have been churning out analyses of his ideology and appeal and alerting policymakers to the threat he posed to the United States. Instead, they deliberately avoided the topic of Islamic terrorism and—in their writings, their testimony before Congress, and their advice to the intelligence community—argued that America could bring peace and democracy to the Middle East only by supporting Islamic fundamentalists.

It is a dismal story, recounted in Martin Kramer's unsparing new

study *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Kramer is the editor of the *Middle East Quarterly* and a former director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. He holds gradu-

ate degrees from Princeton and Columbia, has taught at the University of Chicago, Cornell, and Georgetown, and is the author of six books on the Middle East.

The story begins in the late 1940s, when Middle East "area studies" sprouted in American universities. The founders of this discipline made a pitch for government fund-

ing on grounds of national interest. They argued, for example, that federal support for American-staffed universities in places like Beirut would strengthen liberal forces in the region, serving as a bulwark against both communism and indigenous movements of sectarian reaction. To a degree, their pitch was self-interested. By breaking with the European model of learning based on the command of ancient and modern languages, and instead framing their object of study as a region of strategic value to the nation, apolitical scholars could contemplate fifteenth-cen-

tury Islamic architecture and still do it on the government's dime.

Whatever their personal views, the postwar generation, Kramer says, were "careful to keep their politics outside the fences they erected around the field." But these were men "of patriotic disposition," who had served their country in war and felt no aversion to maintaining ties to Washington. The government periodically opened its classified archives to scholars, but for the most part was content to reap the benefits of a broad and gradually accumulating scholarly knowledge of the region.

In those early days, the ruling paradigm in Middle Eastern studies was the investigation of "development" or "modernization." Drawing on social science texts like Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), scholars argued that the Middle East had embarked upon a path of gradual but inevitable secularization, urbanization, industrialization, and political participation. The region was bound to become modern—that is, more like the United States—and American students saw their job as understanding that process and even helping it along.

Two events unanticipated by Middle East experts brought the modernization paradigm crashing to the ground: the disintegration of Lebanon and the Shiite revolution in Iran. Lebanon had been the center of cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and American influence in the Arab world before it was engulfed in civil war in 1975. And Shah Reza Pahlavi had been a leading modernizer. His overthrow by Islamic theocrats in 1979 stunned Americans.

Also in the late seventies, the radical students of the 1960s began to enter the professoriate. The way was cleared for them to wrest power from the Middle East studies establishment when Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) crystallized a new understanding of the field. The founding text of postcolonial studies, *Orientalism* effectively delegitimated all previous scholarship on the Middle East by branding it as racist. Said drew no



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distinction between the most ignorant and bigoted remarks of nineteenth-century colonialists and the most accomplished pronouncements of contemporary Western scholars: All Western knowledge of the East was intrinsically tainted with imperialism. Any scholarly characterization of the distinctive nature of Islamic civilization or of Middle Eastern culture was taken by Said to be a roundabout justification for Western rule of the irrational natives.

However tendentious the argument of *Orientalism*, it was carefully drawn—all of it, that is, but the final chapter, which strongly indicted contemporary scholarship as neocolonialist. This Kramer says was superficial, unsubstantiated, and “lazy.” Said offered virtually no evidence to support his bold condemnations and overlooked vast tracts of scholarly

work that cut against his interpretations.

Yet, with rare exceptions, American scholars remained silent. Some dismissed Said’s caricature as unserious, while others were cowed by the impossibility of disproving false charges of racism. Most important, Said’s attack came at a time when the rise of religious reaction and social chaos in the Middle East had undermined the confidence of Middle East scholars.

The effects of *Orientalism* on the field were profound. It not only made the avowal of a scholar’s political principles appropriate, even necessary; Said’s work, in Kramer’s words, “enshrined an acceptable hierarchy of political commitments, with Palestine at the top, followed by the Arab nations and the Islamic world.” As UCLA historian Nikki Keddie put it,

“orientalism” became a sort of swear word with which to dismiss the work of anyone who took the “wrong” position on the Arab-Israeli conflict or whose views were judged conservative.

But that was the least of it. The most pernicious effect of Said’s book was presumptively to impeach as racist the scholarship of anyone not born in the East. *Orientalism* was turned into a manifesto for affirmative action for Arab and Muslim scholars, who, despite their predominantly upper-class origins, could gain admittance to the academy’s racial spoils system once they were cast as victims of racist, colonialist oppression.

From the earliest days, immigrant scholars had played a role in the field, without enjoying any sort of preference. In 1971, Kramer reports,

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3.2 percent of America's Middle East area specialists had been born in the region. By 1992, the figure was nearly half. This demographic transformation consolidated the conversion of Middle Eastern studies to leftist anti-Americanism.

Now in control of America's bastions of Middle Eastern studies, the Saidians (whose luminaries included University of Chicago historian Rashid Khalidi and MIT historian Philip Khoury) were nevertheless no better placed than the modernizers had been to make sense of developments in the region. This is because, at a time when the influence of Islamic fundamentalism was growing, Said's scheme stigmatized scholarly discussion of Islam as intrinsically "essentializing" and bigoted. Said himself was hostile to religion, a secular leftist with little knowledge of Islam.

Said's postmodern inflection of Marxism had no more place for Islam than did the leftism of the well-heeled secular immigrants who embraced the postcolonial paradigm. Instead of a fundamentalist revival, Said's followers awaited a progressive revolution. They took the chaos in Beirut, the advent of Khomeini, and other signs of transformation in the region as evidence of an emerging revolt of the dispossessed. A new order would arise in the Middle East, they thought, and it would be one that empowered women, students, intellectuals, and refugees. Under these circumstances, Kramer writes, "the duty of the sympathetic scholar was to study these forces, prove their potential on a theoretical level, and support them as a practical matter. As the progressive forces seized the initiative in Middle Eastern capitals, their allies would do the same on American campuses."

But no progressive revolution materialized in the Middle East. Khomeini ruthlessly purged the secular left, fundamentalism spread, and even "modern" women in many places began to don the veil. Having stigmatized any attention to the religious or cultural character of Islam as

an orientalist thought crime, the postcolonialists were left without a way to address these developments.

Into the breach stepped John Esposito, a professor of Islamic studies at Holy Cross College who, in books like *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (1992) and (with John O. Voll) *Islam and Democracy* (1996), popularized Said's ideas by purging them of their overt leftism and anti-Americanism and ingeniously applying them to Islam.

Scholars faced the challenge of explaining the seeming exceptionalism of Islam—its resistance to modernization and democratization—at a time when belief in Islamic exceptionalism had been identified as neo-

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colonial bigotry. Esposito's solution was to announce that Islamic fundamentalism had been a movement of democratic reform all along, and only orientalist prejudice had prevented Westerners from seeing this happy truth. Americans would need to transcend their ethnocentric notions of democracy in order to understand that fundamentalist Islamic movements might forge "effective systems of popular participation" in ways unknown to the West.

His reputation growing, Esposito was elected president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in 1988, and in 1993 took the helm of Georgetown University's new Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. He and his followers disparaged public concern about terrorism as barely disguised anti-Muslim prejudice. Thus, after the first World Trade Center bombing in

1993, Columbia historian Richard Bulliet organized a conference not to grapple with the emergence of terrorism in New York, but to attack the wave of anti-Muslim prejudice that supposedly would be set off by a guilty verdict in the bombers' trials.

Throughout the 1990s, American academics simply refused to study Islamic terrorism. Instead, they searched in vain for a Muslim "Martin Luther," some thinker who might reinterpret the Islamic tradition so as to adapt it to democracy. Osama bin Laden could only be an embarrassment to scholars who saw political Islam as benign. To this day, American scholars have produced not a single serious study of bin Laden, his ideology, or his influence. Six months before September 11, Sarah Lawrence professor Fawaz Gerges, whose work drew on Esposito's paradigm, asked: "Should not observers and academics keep skeptical about the U.S. government's assessment of the terrorist threat? To what extent do terrorist 'experts' indirectly perpetuate this irrational fear of terrorism by focusing too much on far-fetched horrible scenarios?"

The Clinton State Department actually made John Esposito a foreign affairs analyst in its intelligence bureau. Edward Said, meanwhile, was approvingly recycling the argument of Esposito's book *The Islamic Threat*—that the fear of terrorism is the latest mutation of Cold War paranoia. An influential article of Said's appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on November 21, 1993, under a title that, in retrospect, nicely encapsulates the worthlessness of his prognostications: "The Phony Islamic Threat."

The decline of Middle Eastern studies is a sobering story of intellectual failure—of the persistent inability of scholars to predict or explain real-world developments in the region of their supposed expertise. Martin Kramer has performed a crucial service by exposing the intellectual rot in a scholarly field of capital importance to our national well-being. ♦